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Relational and Existential Challenges of Practicing Dialogic Action Research – Working with Social Concrete Blocks in Organizations

Marianne Kristiansen

The article illustrates that there seems to be a fairly large distance between action research ideals of dialogue, democracy, participation, and involvement and the actual challenges we have met when practicing dialogic action research in hierarchical organizations where dialogue is always already embedded in organizational power relations. An overall purpose is to show that we are not only involved professionally as action researchers, but also challenged existentially as human beings when practicing dialogic action research. This has at least two consequences. One is about giving up knowing in advance. The other is about focusing on the quality of the relations with the participants, because this relationship seems to have critical impact on the quality of the results of dialogic action research projects.

The article presents some concepts developed in dialogic action research projects in Danish, private and public organizations such as AR dilemmas, self-referentiality, emergent mutual involvement and not knowing, social concrete blocks, and the arbitrary punctuator.

Key words: dialogue, action research, emergence, interpersonal relations, organizational conflicts

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Purpose

The article presents a dialogic perspective on action research developed in projects in Danish organizations from the middle of the 1990's. It is an approach to organizational development work that has dialogue as both its object and its method. We facilitate groups in organizations to enter into dialogue on topics in which they are deeply engaged, so they can arrive at new, shared practical solutions.[1] These dialogues may concern a new product, a new mentor program, team norms, balancing expectations between team and management etc. Through this process, we are simultaneously co-exploring and co-developing new practical theories on, e.g., midwifery and dialogic competencies (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005) and involvement as a dilemma in team-based organizations (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2006). We call this approach dialogic action research.

The article focuses on some concepts which emerged when the relations between the participants and us became a challenge, i.e. on AR dilemmas, self-referentiality, emergent mutual involvement and not knowing, social concrete blocks, and the arbitrary punctuator. The article illustrates how these concepts helped to cope with the actual challenges as well as to understand what was happening between the participants and/or between them and us. The article focuses on understanding and coping with a particular communication pattern between management and several teams working in a value- and team-based department. This turned out to become a question of working with social concrete blocks in the eye of an organizational storm (see below).

An overall purpose is to illustrate that we are not only involved professionally as action researchers, but also challenged existentially as human beings when practicing dialogic action research.

Points of view

The article is based on several points of view:

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[1] The noun "we" refers to Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen and I who carried out the projects jointly. All concepts were co-developed between the participants and the two of us.

Firstly, we have experienced a fairly large distance between action research ideals of dialogue, democracy, participation, and involvement and the actual challenges we have met when practicing dialogic action research in hierarchical organizations where dialogue is always already embedded in organizational power relations. We have come to understand dialogic action research as a complex, messy, and challenging process characterized by ethical and political dilemmas (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2006, 2007). By sharing examples from our praxis, we hope to open a window into this process with pitfalls, imperfection, learning, and joy. In the future, we would like action research literature to give a close and down-to-earth description of actual praxis to inspire new as well as experienced action researchers.

Secondly, we have come to understand dialogic action research as ways of being present in emerging and mutually participatory processes embedded in organizational contexts (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). We are involved existentially, so to speak. We summarize this with the concept of emergent, mutual involvement. This understanding has at least two consequences. One is about giving up knowing in advance, the other is about focusing on the quality of the relations with the participants:

We have worked on giving up a notion of being in control and knowing ahead, because principally we are never able to predict what waits around the next corner. We understand this as a break with European, rationalist philosophy of science traditions (Adorno et al. 1972).

When co-working with participants – who are the experts on their own work life – we learned, too, that the quality of our mutual relations seems to influence the quality of our action research results. This point of view rests on empirical studies of our interaction with participants based on analyses of videotapes (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004). This is not a new point of view. Rogers presented similar points of view within therapy throughout his professional carrier (1959, 1980). However, empathy, accept, and congruence also seem to become important for co-producing new methods, new concepts, and practical solutions in dialogic action research to-day, even though there are major differences between working in therapeutic and organizational contexts.

Thus, we do not understand dialogue as questions of applying certain tools or of structuring conversations. It is basically about certain ways of being present – characterized by sharing, daring, and caring – in complex organizational contexts (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). We understand this as different from research which has involvement as espoused value, but technical, rational interests of cognition as actual theory-in-use (Habermas, 1968).

Background, theoretical perspective, and structure

The concepts presented in this article were developed in two Danish action research projects. The first was carried out in the Research and Development Department of Bang & Olufsen from 1995 to 1999. The primary participants were 24 managers at three hierarchical levels. The practical purpose was to carry through a process where the managers were trained as mentors (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2007). The second project was carried out in a public administration department with 70 academic, office and service employees divided into seven teams, with one senior manager, and one manager. The project focused on three kinds of dilemmas in a value- and team-based organization: traditional dilemmas between managers and employees, modern dilemmas in and between team members, and action research dilemmas between the participants and us as action researchers (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2006).

Our concepts are influenced and confined by our background in interpersonal organizational communication. We define this as face-to-face conversations between organization members and between organization members and action researchers who are always already situated in multiple contexts (Eisenberg/Goodall 1997). We understand action researchers to be self-implicative parts of the field of inquiry which we co-explore and -develop with members of the organization (Bateson 1972; Hawes 1999).

The structure of the article follows a two-day seminar where the above mentioned public department ended a two year process of working with value-based management in their team based organization. The seminar became a challenge of practicing dialogic action research, because literally, it

developed into a hot spot between the participants and us (Mindell 1995). The article follows the progression of this seminar while at the same time looking back at prior situations both within the department and in different organizations when illustrating the following concepts: AR dilemmas, self-referentiality, emergent mutual involvement and not knowing, social concrete blocks, and the arbitrary punctuator.

AR dilemmas

Some months before the seminar, we realized that on several occasions we were reacting to certain communication patterns (see below) between management and teams as if we were passive objects. At meetings, we had withdrawn mentally or been in doubt about what was decided without checking. Sometimes, we left without having presented our own points of view or suggestions. We began reflecting on whether we reacted as if we were employees who had resigned or given up.

At this time, we were confronted with the Action Research dilemma (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2006). This dilemma unfolds in the relation between the participants and us as dialogic action researchers in the process when trying to co-change the organization (Lewin 1948). Thus, the AR dilemma is not only "out there" between teams and management and within the teams; it is also present between them and us. How do we, e.g., cope with a self-managing team who does not have time to join our project? Can they, e.g., say no? How do we position ourselves in the field of tension between management and employees?

We realized that if we continued reacting as if we were merely objects of "their" patterns, we contributed to letting the change process come to a standstill or become a repetition of what already happened in the relation between teams and management. So, we decided to step out of the role as objects and change our ways of being present, i.e. to actually become present or alive as subjects or human beings. Let me give some trivial and practical examples: We would start meetings at the announced time no matter who were present, because we became irritated while waiting. We would encourage everybody to present suggestions, because we lost energy when listening to one-way

monologues. We would check what was decided when in doubt and present our own observations, ideas, and suggestions when they had something to offer to future solutions etc.

In retrospect, this sounds simple and naive. Then, the difficult part was to recognize our own self-referentiality, i.e. our own a priori ways of categorizing various situations and a priori ways of relating (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004). Listening to taped meetings turned out to be a help, so did our mutual dialogues. In the introduction, I wrote that dialogic action research is about being present in emerging and mutually participatory processes embedded in organizational contexts. What have been written above are illustrations of this point of view. Once again, we learned that apparently, our ways of being present seemed to influence the change process.

A little later, a team decided to lock their office door at the announced time at meetings. This meant, if somebody were late, they would have to knock on the door. Some teams decided to change their meeting cultures by letting some members act as bystanders. At the final, two-day seminar, they said they had become more efficient and less stressed. Other teams told they had begun saying no to new tasks. Some teams told about dialogues on their team norms and how this helped them to avoid individualization of work problems etc.

It is not possible to document a causal connection between changes in our interaction with the teams and these results. Speaking from a second order systemic perspective, you might say that punctuation is always arbitrary (Bateson 1972). Did the participants change their communication because of our interaction with them? Was it vice versa? Or? In retrospect, it is my interpretation that we changed our relationship with the participants when changing from acting as objects to acting as subjects. By doing so, I guess we began functioning as role models, perhaps unconsciously inspiring them to take initiatives, as mentioned in the examples above.[2]

Within the action research community, I have learned that reflections on ways of being present and on self-referentiality are sometimes considered

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[2] When interviewing participants in a different project, I learned how they used each other as role models when developing new competencies etc. (Kristiansen 2004).

therapeutic or unnecessary deviations from an emancipatory, political task. I think this might be true when such reflections focus on relational processes, only. If they do, they tend to develop into group therapy as described by Yalom (1995). This is well known knowledge within the early history of American organizational development and the history of the National Training Laboratories (NTL) (Yalom 1995; Kleiner 1996; Bradford/Gibb,/Benne 1964). However, when reflections on such concepts are combined with a common task and a goal decided in co-operation with the participants, they often contribute to making change processes goal-driven, as illustrated in the examples above.

Thus, for several reasons working with ways of being present and self-referentiality is a vulnerable affair. It differs from some action research traditions of looking mainly at the interaction between them out there and the task, and thus makes action researchers vulnerable to criticism of focusing mainly on themselves in a global world where millions of people need help. It makes me, and I assume similar action researchers, vulnerable in the actual action research processes, too, because we are no longer present only as professional action researchers. We involve ourselves professionally as human beings looking at our own ways of, e.g., handling power relations in projects when working on practical issues (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004).

As mentioned, our own projects in modern, Danish organizations have indicated that our ways of being present as dialogic action researchers seem to influence the quality of our action research results. Thus, I assume there is a connection between the quality of the interaction between the participants and the action researchers involved and the quality of the practical and theoretical results produced in action research projects.

Decision and planning of a seminar

The project management team and we co-plan the final two-day seminar. The project management team is in charge of the whole change process and represents members of the different teams and both managers. When we began co-operating with the department, they had been working on this process for almost a year. We decide the seminar is going to be about evaluating the whole

process and about the future of the department. Up till now, the main focus has been on modern dilemmas. In the future, management development will be given priority as well as coaching. We also decide that all teams and management circulate a written case before the seminar and present their cases on the seminar. We encourage them to do this creatively. Finally, we decide that the two of us present our picture of their organization based on an article published in IJAR (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2006). The final program of the seminar looks like this: on the first day, everybody will present their cases and evaluate the process, on the second day, they will practice coaching in their teams and develop plans of future actions.

Creative presentations and a scream

The seminar opens with all teams presenting their cases.[3] In the department, there is a tradition of acting, singing, and playing. This happens, too, on this seminar. One team dramatizes their meetings which are constantly being interrupted by either cell phones, so that changing chairmen have to leave the meetings, or by the manager who places a new task on the table. Another team presents a marionette theatre play where the marionette dolls talk about plenty topics at the same time without reaching a conclusion – or become silent when the tallest puppet – the senior manager – raises his head and expresses some typical comments. Different teams give examples of their work situation before and after the process and of our ways of working with them. One team tells that the process did not provide them with concrete results. A team sings about back up systems, team coordinators, self-management, and about saying no to new tasks. The song ends with this chorus: "Imagine, if once management and we could say: "You are a colleague and so we like you". One team ends their presentation with a scream while distributing a

[3] Only the creative presentations were video-taped. The rest of article is based on written notes, written material and taped oral summaries. When quoting employees, managers, and ourselves in the following, these quotations are not complete textual versions of what they or we said orally. The purpose of this article is not to give a close linguistic analysis of what was said, but to present and illustrate some basic dialogic action research concepts. Because of this purpose, I do not think this obvious methodical limitation will influence the contents and the conclusions of this article.

copy of the painting "the scream" by the Norwegian painter, Edward Munch. They seem to ask: "How loud do we have to scream to make management listen to us?" In between, there is laughter, applause, comments, and talk. Finally, management gives a speech and a power point presentation. We are enthusiastic about the presentations, but fear, too, that our own is going to be somewhat academic and dry.

Around lunch, the senior manager announces that unfortunately, he is going to leave for an important meeting at the end of the afternoon, when we will be presenting our understanding of their team-based organization. He will be back in the evening.

An eiderdown spiral with many resources

We start our presentation with a metaphor of their organization. We call it an eiderdown spiral with many resources. Earlier, the project management team has heard a light version of this metaphor. We have also told management about our reactions to their arriving later or leaving earlier at meetings, and our observations of an unequal distribution of the allotted time of speaking at meetings. However, this is the first time we present the metaphor and the concepts of the traditional, the modern, and the action research dilemmas for almost everybody in the department. This did not occur to us when preparing our presentation.

We have chosen the eiderdown spiral as a metaphor of an apparently mutually reinforcing communication pattern between management and employees. Management uses many words as opposed to employees who become silent and seem to have resigned. The more words the more silence and visa versa. It is our interpretation that this communication pattern places itself on top of the organization like an eiderdown with a downward spiraling impact.[4] This happens in spite of the fact that there are many resources in the department. Many employees express great pleasure and enthusiasm in their work, in their co-operation with colleagues, and in the freedom given to them by

[4] The eiderdown spiral may also bear connotations to being irregular, slow or light. Here, I have only stressed the impact of the downward spiral.

management; social responsibility and cultural diversity are taken into consideration when employing new employees, etc. Therefore, we decided to talk about an eiderdown spiral with many resources.

In concrete terms, the downward eiderdown spiral is about contradictions between espoused values of involvement and actual theories-in-use. Management talks about 80% at meetings while wanting involvement. There seems to be a contrast between many words about self-management and involvement and actual decisions and action. We have also been at meetings where management or team members arrive later and leave earlier than the announced time.

Now, some team members enter the floor: ”This is exactly what happened at lunch time when the senior manager told that he would be gone this afternoon. We would have liked to know this somewhat earlier”.

We nod in reply and continue: ”Often at meetings, you are quiet and do not present your own proposals. We fear you might have resigned or have started to tell half-truths? We would miss your suggestions if we were your managers. It is our interpretation that there seems to be two very different perspectives in this department. When together with us, you explain you have tried to tell management about your criticism, but nothing happens. When confronting management with this criticism without mentioning names, it seems as if you (the present manager) have not heard it before.”

At this moment, we understand the eiderdown metaphor as a mutually reinforcing communication pattern between management and employees. We also understand it as an example of a traditional dilemma between employees telling they cannot shout loud enough to make management listen as opposed to management telling they have not been presented with this criticism before.

Dialogue philosophers as Buber (1965, 1994), psychologists and communication researchers as Rogers and Cissna/Sieburg (Rogers 1959, 1962; Cissna/Sieburg 1981), and social philosophers as Honneth (2003) have argued that confirmation or recognition seem to be a fundamental condition of experiencing oneself as heard and seen as a human being, i.e. as a condition

of developing self-confidence.[5] According to Honneth, this seems to be important for developing self-appreciation (Selbstschätzung) in social communities as, e.g., work places. Thus we interpret the scream above as a vocal underlining of how loud the team has to shout to make management listen to them, i.e. as a scream for managerial recognition of their work place perception.

Working with not knowing and emergent mutual involvement

A little later, there is complete silence in the room. I remember thinking I could hear a pin drop. This is particularly true when we begin speaking about modern dilemmas and the development from wage earners to modern employees (Peters 2001) and about how managerial functions seem to be internalized. We mention a dilemma between enthusiasm and strong emotional reactions like grief and loss of trust when apparently self-managed team members are treated like wage earners. Modern employees seem to involve themselves as whole persons and seem to need managerial and collegiate recognition or confirmation. It is our interpretation that recognition seems to be on a fairly permanent leave in this organization. So we support the chorus of the song: "Imagine, if once management and we could say: you are a colleague and so we like you".

Some of the employees nod, others smile slightly, some seem to have moist eyes. In earlier research projects, we learned that it is not possible to infer causally from observations of interpersonal communication to conclusions of how this communication is experienced subjectively from the inside (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2004). Nevertheless, it is my spontaneous interpretation that truth is in this silent meeting between them and us/me. This interpre-

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[5] The authors use this concept differently. Buber talks about confirmation from a philosophical, anthropological perspective; Rogers uses the concept of positive regard from an interpersonal, psychological perspective; Cissna/Sieburg uses the concept of confirmation from an interpersonal communication perspective. Honneth introduces a broader version of the concept of recognition (Anerkennung), which covers three kinds of spheres: A private sphere (Selbstvertrauen), a judicial or legal sphere (Selbstachtung), and a sphere of solidarity (Selbstschätzung). These are seen from an onthological perspective.

tation is based on my observations of their communication combined with my own bodily, emotional, and intuitive sensation of the quality of our mutual contact, with images emerging while speaking, with my experiences of what has taken place at earlier planned meetings between management and employees, and with random validation of this interpretation (later, some teams confirmed this interpretation; the same evening, a team wrote a song about our words being true).[6]

Having presented the modern dilemmas, several employees begin talking spontaneously:

”This is exactly what we experience in our daily work. We have tried to tell this on several meetings, but we have not been heard. It is really wrong that our senior manager is not here. It is very important that all of us get a shared picture of what is happening in our organization. I do not agree with your words about resignation, but they start a dialogue, I want everybody to participate in it.” Somebody suggest we repeat our presentation the next day when the senior manager will be present. The project management team joins the discussion and together we decide to do so. Afterwards, they and we revise the program for the next day.

This change of decision and program is an example of emergent, mutual involvement and not knowing. It means that program and structure is revised throughout the process in relation to what emerges during the process and in the interaction between the participants. It means, too, that we did not, e.g., know what consequences our presentation would have. It is our experience that no matter how well we prepare ourselves, we can never know what will emerge in the process. To us action research is about giving up the power of knowing in advance, albeit resting on years of scholarship, inquiry and engagement with the questions of organization change, and instead being prepared to meet what is unexpected. Originally, we understood this as our naiveté, now we call it ‘productive not-knowing’ (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2007). We consider this to be a central part of emergent, mutual involvement

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[6] There are many problems of philosophy of science involved in this example, which I have chosen to leave out. In case you read Danish, I refer to Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen (1997), which is about truth being produced in meeting.

more in line with a dialogic tendency within organizational development than with an elite a priori one (Deetz 2001).

Working with social concrete blocks in the eye of an organizational storm

Both managers (including the senior manager) and employees are present when we repeat our speech the text day. In comparison with the day before, I sense the energy almost like a bated breath. When speaking about modern dilemmas and emotional costs of team employees, the senior manager nods. When talking about traditional management compared with modern team management, he asks for examples. We give some from the project. They are about delegating tasks to certain persons in the team as opposed to delegating them to the whole team; about managerial recognition of certain employees as opposed to managerial recognition of the whole team; about self-management as opposed to co-management. Towards the end, the manager says that team management will play an important role in the future.

So far, the conversation has been between the senior manager and us. Now, some of the employees join the conversation: "It is precisely the modern dilemmas which we have tried to tell you about. We experience that we cannot get through to you. We cannot shout loud enough to make you hear what we say and listen to us. It is really frustrating, because we love our work and the freedom you give us. But in our team there is simply too much work. I fear people will go down with stress. This cannot continue."

The senior manager asks when he did not hear their cry: "I do not understand. I really try to listen to you. At our weekly meetings, we talk about many different cases. I have also started meeting with several teams. But I know I have been in charge of too many teams. However, this has been changed with the new organization plan".

Some of the employees interrupt, speaking in loud voices: "Perhaps you listen, but nothing happens. We talk and talk, but there is no follow up, there is no action, whatsoever. You do not listen when we talk about having too many tasks. You simply don't". Different employees in the department join by saying: "This is not what we meant to tell. We feel you listen to us".

"Don't mother him", the first group interrupts. Some start looking down or talking to the ones sitting next to them. This continues for a short while.

I begin feeling really hot and perspire while standing in the middle of the conflicting perspectives between some of the employees vs. management and some of the employees. I hear they speak louder, start accusing ("We talk and talk …"), and use you-messages ("You do not listen"), but I am in doubt about how to cope with the situation in the best possible way. Jørgen intervenes by saying in a loud voice: "Now I am placing myself right in the middle of your points of view". I have worked with conflicting perspectives in small groups, but there is a great difference between the energy raised in such groups and the energy raised among 70 employed in an organization. As mentioned, too, in the introduction, there are differences between action research ideals of dialogue, democracy, involvement, and participation and actually standing in the eye of an organizational storm.

Earlier, we understood the eiderdown spiral as a mutually reinforcing communication pattern between employees and management. The former saying or shouting: "You do not listen to us", the latter saying: "I have not heard this before". The former shouting: "We cannot cope with all these tasks", the latter answering: "But you are a self-managing team". We also interpreted this pattern as an example of a traditional dilemma. Are these interpretations sufficient to understand the interaction above between the participants and to cope with the situation in constructive ways? I do not think so.

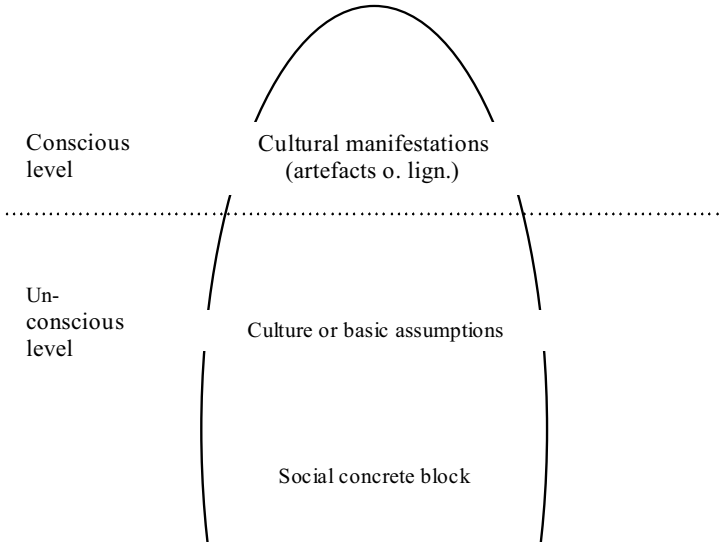
We have been in similar situations in different organizations where we have felt like standing in the eye of a storm. These situations have differed in many ways, but they share some similarities, too. Like in the example above, we have experienced a very strong or sometimes very offensive energy in the room when conflicting perspectives have clashed either directly as above or indirectly (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005: 197 ff.). Like in the situation above, we have reacted bodily by perspiring, freezing, by a rapid pulse – or by becoming wide awake almost like animals sensing dangers. The reaction of being wide awake corresponds with the quiet at the centre of a storm, the others do not. In retrospect, it is our interpretation that such situations tend to occur when over a period of time the participants and we have been involved

in processes which question the unspoken or particular taboos, often dealing with the ways power is handled.

It is my interpretation that the participants and we are questioning a relational pattern that over time has stiffened into a social concrete block (see below): Some of the employees do not think it is possible to shout loud enough to make the senior manager listen to and confirm their perception of the actual work problems. On the other hand, the senior manager thinks he has been listening to the employees and asked for examples on various occasions.

This interpretation is based on several conditions: on the strength of the tension in the room; on the circumstance that both employees and the senior manager seem to understand themselves as objects of the pattern and each other; on my embodied feeling, i.e. the way I sense and read the situation; on my contextual knowledge of the process in the organization prior to this discussion, i.e. this is the first time the pattern is being spoken out aloud in the whole department; and on similar experiences from different organizations. Until now, the concept of the social concrete block seems to be the most comprehensive interpretation of this situation.

We understand social concrete blocks as man made, unproductive relational patterns that over a period of time stiffen into unquestioned assumptions and alienated organizational patterns which are taken for granted (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005: 282). This means that man made unproductive relational patterns co-constructed by organizational subjects change into "subjects" that govern the ones who once co-constructed them. We understand these processes as examples of alienation (Marx 1844; Berger/Luckmann 1992). It is our experience that part of the unspoken often hardens into a social concrete block, which can become a more or less dominant part of an organizational context. When meeting a social concrete block, we experience it as a certain tension in the room and as almost quasi-material, as if you can almost touch or hurt yourself on it. Theoretically, the concept of the social concrete block expresses a kind of historical objectivity. It can be illustrated by interpreting Schein's theory of organizational culture (1986) as an organizational iceberg, in which social concrete blocks represent an underlying, quasi-material level below the basic assumptions:



In some respect, action research can be said to be about questioning epistemological habits (Argyris/Schön 1996; Bateson 1972). When working on questioning basic assumptions on a cultural level, we think dialogic action research can be done with relatively little risk in a process where everybody is a dialogue partner or a midwife. We think it is fair to say that here everybody is moving within organizational civilization, reflecting rationally on pros and cons, using their cortex when trying to co-construct new insight or solutions. Much of our own dialogue work takes place on this double loop level. When working with social concrete blocks, we think momentarily, everybody steps out of organizational civilization into an organizational jungle reacting emotionally or instinctively.[7] Some shout, cry, perspire, blush, become very silent, pale etc. Phrased differently, most of us attack, take flight, or freeze, i.e. we react instinctively in ways that can be compared to the ways animals of preys react when presented with dangers (Brantbjerg/Marcher/Kristiansen

[7] Above, I have distinguished between organizational civilization and jungle as if they were two separate spheres. They might also be understood as two overlapping spheres being present at the same time.

2004). It is my assumption that questioning social concrete blocks can be experienced instinctively in these ways.[8]

Social concrete blocks raise some important practical questions. Firstly, how do we as dialogic action researchers handle chaos when conflicting perspective clash in fiery ways? Some conflict theories suggest "go with the flow" and let the participants handle the process themselves (Bush/Folger 1994; Mindell 1995). Different conflict theories emphasize the need of creating some frames of handling and structuring conflicting chaos (Vindeløv 2004). Our experience has taught us to agree with the latter point of view. This is particularly important in hierarchical organizations when several structural layers are present at the same time. Even though chaos cannot be predicted or controlled, it is still possible to set up some frames that create a minimum of containing safety for the participants – and ourselves. If this is not done, organizational conflicts can escalate into encroachment situations where some employees and/or managers attack each other or the action researchers while the rest are co-witnessing. Such situations might be experienced as instances of public mobbing.[9] Secondly, what do we do as dialogic action researchers to remain alive and alert in the eye of the storm? Bodily exercises and theoretical understanding of instinctive reactions in situations of crisis have helped me to keep standing on my feet, sometimes clear-sighted, but certainly not always.

Is punctuation arbitrary in power organizations?

Not knowing means never knowing ahead what will emerge in the process and how to handle what emerges. During this seminar, we became in doubt

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[8] However, we never examined these reactions from a physiological perspective, so we cannot know empirically if this interpretation is true. This goes as well for the interpretation of the situation above.

[9] An organizational acquaintance told the following story: Once he was participating in a managerial course where the manager with the lowest, daily score had to wear a fool's cap the whole next day. On questioning what he did, he answered: "I chose to wear the hat, because everybody else did, but I felt really ashamed". This might have been meant just as a joke, but was it fun, and what did he learn? I think the story is an example of public, managerial mobbing and of losing face in organizations.

about how to handle the conflicting perspectives between management and some of the employees. Jørgen decided, as mentioned, "to place himself right between management and employees". In earlier dialogic action research projects, we have, e.g., become objects of social concrete blocks without realizing that this was the case when it took place (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2005). This, too, meant accepting solutions contradictory to our own moral.

Alternatives to this position could have been to side with either management or employees or just to facilitate the process. Earlier, some employees had asked us: "Whom do you side with?" "With nobody, we side with the process and are nobody's," we answered contradicting our own epistemological point of view. For years, we have known that there is no such position as a neutral researcher or a neutral point of vantage (Adorno et al. 1972).

We experienced the plenary discussion as if we were balancing on a tightrope. On one hand, we would not let down the employees telling about not being heard and recognized. On the other, we would not participate in what might become public slaughtering or criticism of management and some of the employees. So self-referentially, we practiced a priori ways of leveling, of being fair to both sides, and of hiding some criticism perhaps due to a mistaken sense of justice.

In retrospect, we have reflected on our choice and had doubts if we chose the right position.

Even though, we do not consider ourselves to be system theorists, we had nevertheless chosen to present the metaphor of the eiderdown spiral in line with second order systemic thinking of arbitrary punctuation (Bateson 1972). This was our self-referential way of categorizing the relational pattern between management and employees. But is the concept of arbitrary punctuation an appropriate choice when applied to power in hierarchical organizations? Do management and employees have an equal share in the relational pattern of the spiral metaphor? We do not think so. The primary responsibility rests with management. In this sense, punctuation in organizations is not arbitrary, because it is already embedded in power systems. To-day, we think we might have contributed to blurring managerial responsibility and our own moral responsibility – and perhaps to camouflaging power relations.

But was siding with, e.g. the employees a realistic alternative? We do not think so. We felt obliged to all members of the project management team who told they wanted everybody to leave the seminar with new hopes and energy for future processes in the department. However, in the situation we might have meta-communicated about the question of arbitrary punctuation. We might have talked about our own doubts, if we had been sufficiently alert and aware of them. However, in the future, we would choose the same position if placed in a similar situation. In organizations, there can be limits to dialogic action research. It is not always possible to be completely congruent because of power structures, professional roles, conflicting interests, and possible threats of public mobbing in which unwittingly, you might become a potential ally (Kristiansen/Bloch-Poulsen 2007). These limits are not fixed once and for all. They are constantly being limited or expanded by the interaction of everybody.

Does this mean that anything goes? No, it means that we are constantly trying to handle dilemmas practically in ways that correspond with the participants involved, with their goal of the process, and with our own moral and political values. This is not an easy job with clear cut choices and answers, because there are no neutral vantage points or neutral roles in organizations. It is, however, possible to talk about our doubts during such processes if we are aware of them.

Was the spiral reversed?

To-day, I think the discussion on conflicting perspectives and recognition had been prepared by everybody in the department for a long period by means of numerous conversations between different teams, between management and teams, within teams, and between them and us. Actually, I think the discussion on conflicting perspectives might be understood as an example of willingness to practice openness, one of the core values of the department.

At the end of the seminar, the senior manager walked into the middle of the room recognizing the employees by telling them how thankful and proud he was of their ways of working and of the results they produced. They were simply the best. Also statistically, when compared with similar European

work places.[10] The employees rose immediately and gave him a standing ovation. For the first time, I saw the senior manager speak with downcast eyes while I was swallowing a lump in my throat. Was the downward falling spiral being reversed for good in this situation? Certainly not, but perhaps a new seed had been sown by means of what seemed to be an example of fleeting, mutual recognition?

Final reflections

By telling a minor story of a two-day seminar, I have tried to illustrate some major points of view and some basic concepts of dialogic action research:

There seems to be a difference between action research ideals of dialogue, democracy, participation, involvement and actual challenges of working with large groups in organizations. I experience this as differences between: cool vs. hot; intellect vs. intellect/ emotions/instincts; order vs. chaos; control vs. not knowing etc.

Once again, we realized the principle of not knowing ahead and emergent, mutual involvement. Besides, changing the program, we thought we were dealing with a mutually reinforcing communication pattern and a traditional dilemma, but were actually faced with questioning a social concrete block in the middle of an organizational storm. We did not realize this until paying attention to our bodily reactions. This social concrete block differed in terms of contents from previous ones by being about confirmation. As mentioned earlier, confirmation is crucial when people and organizations try to develop and change. The scream expressed this in a nutshell.

When faced with social concrete blocks, facilitation moved from handling dialogue to handling conflicts. How did this influence the quality of our interaction with the participants?

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[10] In case you are not familiar with Danish culture, I want to emphasize that such words are very rare within Danish organizations. Mostly, no recognition means good news. This is particularly true in that part of Denmark where this project was carried out. This part is known for the law of Jante written by a late, Danish author, Aksel Sandemose. This law begins by saying: “Do not think you are better than any of us”.

The answer to this question deals with what competences do action researchers have? Are we merely trained academically as researchers? Are we trained practically, too, as, e.g., dialogue or conflict facilitators focusing on social competencies? Thus, quality of interaction is also a practical question of what competencies and experience action researchers bring to the field.

In the future, I would like not only theoretical, but also practical training of action researchers to be given priority to help improve the quality of the interaction with participants, because we are confronted with relational and existential challenges, too.

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